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Play-Based Learning and Social Development

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Introduction

Play is universal and critical for healthy social development. Defined simply, play is “just pretend”, and the critical characteristics are:[1]

1. Play is intrinsically motivated; it occurs because the child is moved to pursue a given activity, not because it is forced on her or reinforced by others;
2. Play is its own “means” and “ends”; it is a behaviour that is not goal-oriented;
3. Play is non-rule-governed; in this regard, play is distinguished from games with rules;
4. During play, children impose their own meanings on objects. They are beyond discovering object properties, and instead ask, "What can I do with these objects?";
5. Play involves some element of nonliterality. Objects are transformed and decontextualized (e.g., a piece of cardboard becomes a "magic mirror"), and people assume nonliteral identities (e.g., 4-year-old Jason becomes Prince Adam).

Play is enjoyable, intrinsically motivated behaviour that is non-rule-governed, non-goal-oriented, and “just pretend”. Play-based learning takes place in a setting that results from the active

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engagement of the child and the interaction between the child and her peers or her environment.

Subject

Play takes many forms. Object play occurs when children exploit the properties of objects to use them in a playful manner.[2] Pretend play or pretense is defined as children's intentional engagement with a mentally represented alternative to reality in a playful setting – that is "it's just pretend."[3] Rough-and-tumble play is physical activity in which children interact in ways that connote aggression, but in fact, is "just pretend."[4] It is through these various forms of play that children learn the skills they need to be prepared for social interactions, school, and the world beyond.

Problems

Despite the importance of play for children's social development, North American children are experiencing diminished opportunities for play due to increased academic pressures and more time spent on digital devices.[5-8] In recent years, kindergarteners in the United States have experienced a marked increase in the emphasis placed on teacher-directed activities, the use of memorization, and high-stakes testing,[9] and a sharp decrease in the amount of time allotted for child-directed activities. Furthermore, children's use of digital media has increased dramatically.[7] In 2014, 38% of children under the age of 2 had used a mobile device compared to only 10% of children two years prior.[10] For these reasons, opportunities for less structured forms of play are diminishing, both at home and in school.[5,11]

Research Context

Because play is vital for children's healthy social development, the loss of opportunities for play is particularly troubling. Through play, children learn to cooperate and to display socially appropriate behaviour. Pretense bolsters children's social competence by allowing children to self-regulate, to cope with stress, and to talk about emotions.[12-16] This increased social competence is associated with more considerate behaviour, friendliness, conflict resolution, and peer acceptance.[17,14,18-20] Through play, children learn to inhibit impulsive behaviours and to plan more adaptive responses. Preschoolers who engage in more open-ended pretend play compared to children who participate in more closed-ended tasks with teacher-determined goals exhibited more private speech, which is often used by children to regulate their behaviour.[21] Rough-and-tumble play allows children to practice self-regulating their physical behaviours under

moderately stressful conditions, yet in a safe and engaging context.[22-26] Children's ability to cooperate, follow social rules, cope with stress, and regulate their emotions are all significant developmental achievements, especially given that children's social adjustment is crucial for school adjustment and success.[27-31]

Key Research Questions

Some key research questions regarding play-based learning and social development remain. First, it is not yet known how best to incorporate play into schools, which, over time, have afforded children fewer play opportunities.[2] Relatedly, it is important for parents to understand the significance of play for adaptive development. Increasingly, children's schedules are being filled with adult-led activities that require goal-achievement, competition, and the serious attention to adult-designated rules and roles. Simply put, many children do not have access to play opportunities.

Recent Research Results

It is possible to implement evidence-based programs, which improve children's socio-emotional functioning. The preschool program targeting domain-general self-regulatory skills, Tools of the Mind,[32] was designed to improve preschoolers' self-regulatory skills using a play-based curriculum. Classrooms that use this curriculum emphasize child-directed pretense. For example, children may have the opportunity to design learning centers involving pretend play, such as a make-believe convenience store where children can buy and sell items, maintain an ATM, set price points for merchandise.[33,34] One study of 147 low-income preschoolers showed that children who participated in the Tools of the Mind curriculum outperformed their peers participating in the Balanced Literacy curriculum on measures of self-regulation.[34]

Beyond the school environment, parental attitudes about play influence children's access to play in the home and in the community.[35,36] Relatedly, the nature of children's play with their parents is largely determined by parental attitudes about play.[37,38] One program, the Ultimate Block Party, successfully enriched parents' understanding of play and its contribution to children's learning and development.[6] Specifically, parents who visited multiple play sites with their children during a one-day public event perceived a stronger connection between play and learning and between socialization through play and children's later success in life. In these ways, researchers have shown that it is possible to increase children's exposure to playful

learning settings in the home and at school.

Research Gaps

Although programs have been successful in making preschool programs more playful for young children, it appears as if play becomes viewed as superfluous once youth enter elementary and middle school. The pressures of high-stakes testing often appear pervasive. There is a need to explore the most effective ways to incorporate play-based learning into traditionally didactic classrooms settings for older children.

In addition, children from lower-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds spend less time than children from higher-SES backgrounds playing sports, participating in outdoor activities, and passive leisure activities. Instead, these children spend more time using digital media.[39,11] Accordingly, more work is needed to understand how to increase play affordances, such as safe, engaging playgrounds, for the children who are most in need of playtime.

Conclusions

Play is voluntary, spontaneous, and joyous. Play and play-based learning are integral to healthy social development in children. Children who play more are more self-regulated, cooperative, considerate, friendly, and socially competent. They display more appropriate social behaviours, coping skills, and experience greater peer acceptance. Despite this, children are experiencing reduced opportunities for play due to increased academic pressures and time spent on digital devices. Further, children from lower-SES backgrounds spend even less time playing than their higher-SES counterparts. Recent work shows promising progress on how to better incorporate play into children's lives in school and at home. Finally, more research is needed on how to provide play-based learning opportunities to children in the elementary grades and beyond and to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

According to the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights,[40] play is the right of every child. Therefore, it is the responsibility of researchers, parents, and policymakers to ensure that children are afforded ample opportunities for play in order to promote healthy social development. In order to achieve this goal, three important steps must be taken. First, research on the importance of play-based learning for children's social development should be

disseminated. Researchers can create partnerships with schools and community centers; parents can discuss the importance of play with other parents and their children's schools; and policymakers can promote public awareness of the evidence about play-based learning by funding public awareness campaigns. Second, playtime in educational settings should be emphasized. Researchers can examine the best ways to incorporate play; parents can participate in groups, which contribute to school districts' decisions about how to structure the school environment; and policymakers can support legislation that promotes the integration of recess and other playful times into the school day. Lastly, sustainable community programs should be aimed at increasing access to play opportunities for children from lower-SES backgrounds. Researchers can develop culturally sensitive, evidence-based programs by partnering with community organizations; parents can help their children participate in available programs; and policymakers can fund efforts to bring play to lower-SES communities.

In sum, play should have a central role in early childhood classrooms and in the lives of all children.[5] In order to achieve this goal, it is the responsibility of researchers, parents, and policymakers alike to "take it to the streets and the playgrounds!"[2]

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